

The Last Days of Maria Y. Orosa

With the recent strong renewed interest in the life of Maria Y. Orosa (henceforth MYO), it is ironic that there has been no location where we could pay tribute to her. Sure, for more than 50 years there has been a Maria Y. Orosa St. in Manila. Most of MYO's siblings were present when the street was renamed for her in 1964. On the 126th anniversary of her birth this month (Nov. 29), a bust of MYO has been unveiled in the Orosa ancestral town of Taal, Batangas. Still, aside from the general area, we don't know the location of her final resting place.

By the beginning of 1945, the people of Manila had already endured three years of a brutal Japanese occupation¹. Throughout the occupation, MYO never interrupted her work at the Bureau of Plant Industry. On February 3, 1945, the Battle of Manila began in earnest. American troops were advancing from the north, their front lines about 3 kilometers away. They had just liberated the American and British civilian internees at the University of Santo Tomas campus. Undeterred, MYO continued going to her office and laboratory.

A 25 year old chemist named Luis "Louie" del Rosario was one of MYO's assistants. The grandson of another chemist, Louie was a suitor of MYO's niece Helen L. Orosa. Also 25, Helen was a nurse at the Philippine General Hospital. Her father was Dr. Sixto Y. Orosa, an elder brother of MYO. During an artillery shelling, MYO and her staff took refuge in one of their improvised bomb shelters. MYO suffered a shrapnel wound on her foot, serious enough to require medical attention. There was no transportation available, and anyone on the street ran the risk of getting caught in the crossfire. But Louie commandeered a pushcart, known locally as a *careton*, to take Maria to the nearest medical facility, which happened to be Remedios Hospital.

The Remedios Hospital was staffed entirely by volunteers during the occupation. A book about Remedios' history was written by Pedro M. Picornell and published in 1995². We won't repeat any of the detailed stories and eyewitness accounts, except for some salient points. Initially organized as an emergency hospital by the Philippine Red Cross, the hospital was located in the Malate Catholic School. Shortly after the beginning of the occupation, the underfunded Philippine Red Cross could no longer operate its emergency hospitals, so Remedios became the sole responsibility of volunteers. Dr. Sixto Y. Orosa lent his administrative skills to initially organize the hospital staff. To identify the building as a hospital, the administrators had a Red Cross sign painted on the roof. They had hoped that the sign would be respected by both the Japanese and American forces. That hope was to be in vain.

MYO was treated and confined at Remedios. Tragedy struck on February 13. American artillery from across the Pasig River to the north started heavy shelling of the area around Remedios. It was the most intense bombardment so far, continuing for three days. Shell after shell landed on Remedios. There was no significant Japanese presence in the area, just isolated pockets of soldiers. The Japanese took their ire out on civilians who dared to venture outside. Author Picornell likened the shelling to stamping out ants with a pile driver.

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By the afternoon of February 16, the shelling was over. American troops marched into and secured the area. But the three day shelling exacted a heavy toll. Hundreds of civilians died, staff, volunteers, patients and people from the neighborhood who had taken refuge in the hospital. The decomposing and mangled bodies were buried as quickly as the volunteers could manage, in the hospital courtyard and nearby empty lots. A Spanish language newspaper called *Voz de Manila* (Voice of Manila) published an article a year later³, calling Feb. 13 “*el dia mas tragico*” or the most tragic day. *Voz* described the aftermath scene as “*mas de 500 cadaveres adornaban el patio y otro rincones del hospital*” or more than 500 corpses covered the patio and other corners of the hospital. Among the dead listed by the *Voz* article was MYO. Louie suffered a serious wound on his thigh, but survived. It remained for the ever faithful Louie to tell MYO’s siblings about her fate, starting with Jose (Pepe) Y. Orosa. (The family of Sixto had evacuated to the home of their mother, Juliana Ylagan Orosa, in Bauan, Batangas.)

The Battle of Manila ended on March 3, 1945. Over 100,000 Filipino civilians perished⁴. MYO did not live to see her beloved Manila liberated. An attempt was made to locate MYO’s remains. Mario’s eldest brother Augusto, aka Toto, then 26, accompanied by our cousin Apolinario (Naring), walked to the Remedios Hospital in an effort to find any marker or trace of MYO. In the ruins of Remedios and the Malate district, no trace could be found.

It is therefore fitting that with the installation of MYO’s bust, her memory is enshrined forever in the Orosa ancestral town.

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Footnotes:

1 - An excellent account of life during the occupation was written by Atty. Marcial P. Lichauco, titled “*Dear Mother Putnam, Life & Death in Manila During the Japanese Occupation.*”

2 - Mario’s sister Charito gifted him this invaluable book.

3 - A scanned copy of the *Voz de Manila* article was given to Mario by Ms. Isabel Picornell, the daughter of author Pedro Picornell. The title of the article, written by Gaston Montero, is “*La Tragedia del Hospital de Remedios, 13 de Febrero de 1945.*”

4 - This figure is widely accepted, the latest mention coming from “*Rampage*,” about the Battle of Manila. Written by James M. Scott and published in 2018, the author quotes freely from Lichauco’s book, but oddly, he does not mention Remedios.

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This bust of Maria Y. Orosa, created by sculptor Roger Caedo, was unveiled at the Escuela Pia in Taal, Batangas on Nov. 29, 2019.